"El tiempo y el amor son uno solo": a Figural Reading of Elena Garro's "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas"

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This essay offers a reading of Elena Garro's short story, "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" (1964), informed by Erich Auerbach's 1938 philological study, "*Figura*". In the latter, Auerbach makes a distinction between two modes of organizing historical narratives: "In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other that is promised and not yet seen" (Auerbach 59). Rather than following a modern, "horizontal" narrative, Garro's short story "vertically" interweaves two historical moments through its protagonist, Laura, who is simultaneously the wife of a 1960s government bureaucrat and the wife of an Aztec warrior during the Fall of Tenochtitlan. The vertical jumps between the two narrative timelines are determined by "something other that is promised and not yet seen": Mexican national consciousness and history. And yet, the impossibility of establishing a *figura* between the two historical narratives results in Laura's self-condemnation as a traitor on both accounts.

https://doi.org/10.31819/9783968698182_001

I intend to proceed in the following manner: As a first step, I will provide a close reading of Auerbach's study that emphasizes the ideological dimension of *figura* as a practice of historical reading. Functionally, this practice established a metaphorical relation between the events of the Old and the New Testament —"figure" and "fulfillment"— that assimilated Jewish history into a universal history of Christian salvation. In this way, *figura* allowed for the creation of a particular kind of historical consciousness amongst the peoples of medieval Europe. It not only provided a clear link between the events of the Old and New Testament, but also placed each Christian in a privileged relation to these events. This is to say that *figura*'s ideological dimension involved the creation of a particular historical subject. According to Auerbach, to be Christian meant nothing less than to have a certain position in History, a position made visible (and possible) by the figural operation. As a second step, then, I will use Auerbach's insight into figural reading as a practice meant to produce historical subjects to analyze the workings of literary time, and its relation to Mexican national consciousness, in Garro's multilayered short story. In brief, I will use Auerbach's figural reading to approach Garro's critique of national consciousness.

This reading experiment is not arbitrary. As James I. Porter has shown, Auerbach's philological investigation was urgent —it was related to the currency of figural reading through the 1930's in Germany, as a strategy of nationalist discourse. Thus, in the first part of my argument I will engage with Porter's important essay "Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of *Figura*", to argue that Auerbach's text is best understood by being placed in its context of production and reception: the *longue durée* development of European nationalisms. If this is the case, it is entirely possible to think of "*Figura*" and "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" as alternative analyses of the same social phenomenon: the symbolic strategies of nationalism and their claims upon different subjects. I do not mean, then, to dogmatically apply Auerbach's

theory of *figura* to Garro's short story, but rather to place each text next to the other and let them speak, as in a kind of play. This ludic dialogue respects the particularity of each text, while at the same time allowing for a general view of the widespread workings of nationalisms. It is a dialogue in which Auerbach helps us understand Garro as much as Garro helps us understand Auerbach.

The blindness of the Jews

It makes sense to start the analysis of Erich Auerbach's "*Figura*" in its second section, which examines the development of *figura* in the Christian world. Although Auerbach traces the written emergence of the word to "the Hellenization of Roman Education in the last century B.C.", his philological interest springs from the Middle Ages and flows backwards to Classical antiquity, rather than the other way around. His curiosity is aroused the moment *figura* stops being a system of rhetoric (Quintilian) and becomes a particular kind of historical consciousness (Tertullian, St. Augustine). Auerbach is interested in *figura* in the latter sense, but also in the transition between the two. What could explain the strange route from Roman rhetoric to Christian historiography?

In its Christian sense, the word *figura* names a practice of reading the Old Testament as prophecy or pre-figuration of the New Testament: "…the aim of this sort of interpretation was to show that the persons and events of the Old Testament were prefigurations of the New Testament and its history of salvation" (Auerbach 30). According to Auerbach, the "relation between the two events is revealed by an accord or similarity" (Auerbach 29). If this formulation is rather vague, this is less due to Auerbach's powers of discrimination than to a constitutive ambiguity in figural reading: "…often vague similarities […] suffice to make the *figura* recognizable…" (Auerbach 29). Perhaps to

emphasize this flexibility, Auerbach introduces the "strangely new meaning" of the Christian *figura* through a catalogue of examples extracted from Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem*. In one of these, Tertullian reads a passage from the Old Testament where Moses refers to Oshea as Jehoshua (Num. 13: 16) and interprets it as "a figure of things to come". Auerbach notes that, in Tertullian's reading, "the naming of Joshua-Jesus is treated as a prophetic event foreshadowing things to come" (Auerbach 29). But one could also, in a much more ambiguous example, read the presence of two sacrificial goats in Leviticus as "figures of the first and second coming of Christ" (Auerbach 29-30). However, what is most important for Tertullian in both cases, as Auerbach notes, is less the nature of the "similarity" between the two events than the fact that they are both historical: "…*figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical" (Auerbach 29). As a practice of reading, then, *figura* awarded historical status to both the Old and the New Testament —this status was constructed reciprocally, the one dependent on the other. According to Auerbach, the investment of figural reading in historicity differentiates it from other practices of reading the Old Testament, such as allegorical reading.

While figural reading awards historical status to the events of the Old and the New Testament, it also establishes a metaphorical relation between them. Still taking his examples from Tertullian, Auerbach names this metaphoric relation "figure" (Old Testament) and "fulfillment" (New Testament; Auerbach 30). Tertullian also recurs to other metaphors to express this relation: "[t]he fulfillment is often designated as *veritas* […] and the figure correspondingly as *umbra* or *imago*" (Auerbach 34). According to Auerbach, the relation between "figure" and "fulfillment" created a "system of figural prophecy, where the risen one both fulfills and annuls the work of his precursor" (Auerbach 51). Thus, even though the events of the Old and New Testaments validated each other historically, there was still an

internal hierarchization designed to differentiate the historical location of each occurrence. What holds this complex dynamic together is the fact that "the truth has become history or flesh" (Auerbach 34). The paradox of the incarnation, the unthinkable moment where eternity and human history cross paths, grounds the relation between "figure" and "fulfillment" and situates each event in a particularly meaningful relation to it.

St. Augustine's contribution to the semantic history of *figura* was a development of the incarnation paradox, the fact that "the truth has become history or flesh". First, Augustine drew a necessary conclusion about the figural relation between the Old and the New Testament: that both historical moments must be, from the beginning, determined from above. Thus, he posited a third moment that, paradoxically, both precedes and follows the events of the Old and the New Testament: "…in Augustine, the confrontation of the two poles, figure and fulfillment, is sometimes replaced by a development in three stages: the Law or history of the Jews as a prophetic *figura* for the appearance of Christ; the incarnation as fulfillment of this *figura* and, at the same time, as a new promise of the end of the world and the Last Judgment; and finally, the future occurrence of these events as ultimate fulfillment" (Auerbach 41). From this paradoxical relation between earthly events and the horizon of eternity, Augustine could not but conclude that the relation between the horizontal game of "figuration" and "fulfillment" only made sense as a vertical relation to something else which existed outside of time. For Auerbach, Augustine "has an idealism which removes the concrete event, completely preserved as it is, from time, and transposes is into a perspective of eternity. Such ideas were implicit in the notion of the incarnation of the Word…" (Auerbach 42). In other words, he arrives at a view of "the eternal character of the figures", the realization that the historical dynamic of "figure" and "fulfillment" always already presupposes a higher instance that overdetermines it. Tertullian himself had pointed out that "for God there is no *differentia temporis*" (Auerbach 42).

Thus, we can say that figural reading involved the horizontal relation between two time-bound events ("figure" and "fulfillment", the latter fulfilling and annulling the former), which were then projected vertically into eternity. The eternal *figura*, however, is always the promise of itself, at least until its ultimate fulfillment in the Last Judgment. As such, this practice of reading transmitted a "vertical" history that "first came to the newly converted peoples as *figura rerum* or phenomenal prophecy, as a prefiguration of Christ, thus giving them a basic conception of history […] and which for almost a thousand years remained the only accepted view of history" (Auerbach 53). Indeed, Auerbach understood the transition from the thousand-year reign of figural reading to modern historiography as the metaphorical distinction between "verticality" and "horizontality": "In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other that is promised and not yet present" (Auerbach 59). In turn, the distinction between figural verticality and modern horizontality posits not only different kinds of historical truths, but also a different relation between history and its subjects: "…in the modern view the event is always self-sufficient and secure, while the interpretation is fundamentally incomplete, [whereas] in the figural interpretation the fact is subordinated to *an interpretation that is fully secured to begin with*…" (Auerbach 59, italics are mine). In other words, while the modern view awards epistemological preeminence to its object (the historical event), a figural reading awards it to its subject, the believer, who is ultimately in charge of establishing the figural relations that constitute the knowledge of history.

This last distinction is of no small importance. Indeed, it is directly related to the historical context out of which figural reading emerged and to the concrete historical function it was

meant to perform. To the question that opened this analysis —what explains the route from Roman rhetoric to Christian historiography?— Auerbach gives both a historical and a political answer: the Christian mission. In the third section of "*Figura*", Auerbach traces the emergence of figural reading to the missions of the first two centuries: "Certain passages in Acts […] show that figural interpretation played an important part in the Christian mission from the very start" (Auerbach 50). And yet, the apostles' preaching amongst Jewish communities does not explain the full historical force of *figura* in Auerbach's narrative. This force can be glimpsed by relating the Apostles' mission amongst the Jewish peoples with Paul's mission amongst the gentiles, a relationship which was not always mutually supportive: "Those passages in the Pauline Epistles which contain figural interpretations were almost all written in the course of Paul's bitter struggle in behalf of his mission among the gentiles: many are answers to the attacks and persecutions of the Judaeo-Christians" (Auerbach 50). For Auerbach, it was the Pauline situation, that is, the spread of Christianity amongst gentility, which ultimately determined *figura*'s ideological operation: to "strip the Old Testament of its normative character and show that it is merely a shadow of things to come…" (Auerbach 50). As we shall see, figural reading not only worked to legitimize Paul's mission amongst the gentiles but was the very condition by which Christianity spread amongst gentility. Figural reading —and this, it seems to me, is Auerbach's fundamental point in "*Figura*"— names the rhetorical strategy by which Christianity's vision of history triumphed amongst the people of Late Antiquity and medieval Europe.

In order to describe with greater clarity the hegemonic dynamic implied in figural reading, I will briefly consider James I. Porter's excellent "Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of *Figura*". In "Disfigurations", Porter embarks on a polemic against scholars who assume that "Auerbach's vision of literary history can be read through the lens of figural reading, as though

he had adopted this interpretative technique and made it his own" (Porter 82)[1]. For him, "Auerbach's own perspective is not that of a practitioner of figural reading. It is that of a historian of language and culture —a philologist in the largest sense of the word…" (Porter 98). Against the idea that *figura* constitutes "something of a mastertrope in Auerbach's conceptual arsenal", he argues that *figura* represented a "vanishing mediator" between the prophetic history of the Christian Middle Ages and the emergence of secular historical consciousness at the outset of modernity: "Figural hermeneutics is not a timeless method of reading. It comes into existence at some point in the first century CE, and it survives for a millennium and a half, after which it is remembered as a historical entity that produced certain conceptual transformations and then ceded these to secular modernity…" (Porter 98). Ultimately, he aims to prove that Auerbach's intellectual alliances lie on the side of secular modernity and not on that of figural prophecy.

Porter sustains his position on two arguments, one intrinsic and the other extrinsic to Auerbach's essay. His close reading of "*Figura*" emphasizes what in Auerbach's text appears in a more cautious and discreet manner: the fact that the practice of figural reading emerges from the *Adversus Judaeos* polemic of the early Christians. We get a hint of this from Auerbach himself, during the list of examples from Tertullian that open the second section of his essay. As we have seen, Auerbach ironically mentions the case of two sacrificial goats in Leviticus that are read as prefigurations of the first and second coming of Christ. He provides the

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[1] Porter's essay belongs to a corpus of research aimed at disentangling the relations between philology and religion in Europe during the hundred years that go from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century. For him, Auerbach's work both substantiates and continues Nietzsche's accusations against "Christian Philology" and its will to "…pull the Old Testament out from under the feet of the Jews". See also his excellent *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*.

references —*Adversus Maricionem* and Tertullian's own *Adversus Judaeos*. Porter clarifies the relation between these two texts by pointing out that "Tertullian recycle[s] parts of this earlier work in his writing *Against Marcion*". (Porter 87). Indeed, Porter reminds us that Tertullian's polemic against Marcion involved the canonical relations between Old and New Testament as a single body of holy scripture. Marcion "had famously sought to exclude the Jewish Bible from the canon of holy scriptures in the second century. Tertullian rejected Marcion's arguments, and in doing so he became the spearhead of a movement to preserve the unity of scripture […] which could then be enforced by demonstrating how the old dispensations prefigured the new —a possibility to which Marcion remained as blind as the Jews he was attacking" (Porter 86). The polemic against Marcion was thus the continuation of a polemic against Jews communities and their rejection of a figural relation between Judaic and Christian scripture —a rejection characterized by figural apologists as a kind of "blindness".

Porter uses the "blindness" metaphor quite consciously, since the "blindness" of the Jews was a commonplace in the *Adversus Judaeos* polemics. As Auerbach writes, St. Augustine could forgive the Jews of the Old Testament, who "still foretold in figures that true sacrifice which the faithful know", but "the latter-day Jews, and here he strikes *a theme which was to run through all subsequent polemics against Jews*, refused in their obdurate *blindness* to recognize this" (Auerbach 40, italics are mine). For Augustine, then, the distinction between Christian and Jew depended on the denial of the particularity of the Old Testament and its acceptance as "purely phenomenal prophecy". Previously we noted that, as historiography, figural reading granted epistemological primacy to the subject of knowledge, who is in charge of forming the historical *figura*. If that is the case, those who do not see are not merely blind, but *obdurately blind*, to use Auerbach's formulation —a blindness that is willed rather than suffered and thus might not be so blind after all.

Indeed, the triumph of the historical consciousness implied in figural reading is explained by Auerbach as a dialectic between "vision" and "blindness": "In this form and in this context, from which Jewish history and national character had vanished, the Celtic and Germanic peoples, for example, could accept the Old Testament; it was a part of the universal religion of salvation and a necessary component of the equally magnificent and universal *vision* of history that was conveyed to them along with this religion" (Auerbach 52, italics are mine). What figural reading thus achieved was a trick of historical *optics*: the negation of Jewish particularity allowed for the "universal vision of history" which, as always, has one's own people as protagonist. For Auerbach, this trick of the eye was crucial for the dissemination of the historical consciousness implied in figural reading: "And yet I believe, though I can offer no strict proof of it, that independently, that is to say without the support of the figural method, it [allegory] would have had little influence on the freshly converted peoples" (55). The distinction between *figura* and allegory —which, as Porter correctly notes, is ultimately impossible to hold on a purely conceptual level— resides, for Auerbach, in what can only be called the seductive power of its historical narrative: the dramatic "vision" of a single universal history. The only thing that this universal narrative could not assimilate was, of course, the original repression on which it was built, a repression that could only be read from the inside as the "blindness" of the Jews. But what if we were to turn the dialectic between "vision" and "blindness" on its head, in order to, as it were, consider the narrative implied in figural reading inside-out? We would be forced to admit that it is not the Jews peoples who cannot see, rather that it is figural reading which is blind to Jewish history. Jewish history thus becomes the blind spot of figural reading, what it cannot see because it depends on such an omission. To look at it would be to undo itself.

Here we can begin to answer a simple, yet often unasked question: why was Auerbach so interested in *figura*? For, by his

own admission ("I believe, though I can offer no strict proof of it…" [Auerbach 55]), we cannot assume a disinterested attitude toward his object. Here is where Porter's second argument comes in. After providing a close reading of "*Figura*", making explicit the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition indexed in Auerbach's essay, he points out that "the deepest logic of figure and fulfillment was very much alive in the 1930s" (Porter 106). Indeed, since the 1920s there had been attempts in Germany to break the single corpus of holy scripture: "There were the attempts by the pro-fascist Evangelical German Christians to eradicate the Hebrew Bible and its Jewish identity from the Holy Writ. Their revival of Marcionite arguments was doubtless fanned by the theologian Adolf von Harnack, who in his 1924 study of Marcion urged the decanonization of the Old Testament" (Porter 104-05). The defense of the Old Testament, predictably, was grounded on the denial of Jewish particularity. In 1933, Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber gave a series of lectures titled "The Religious Values of the Old Testament and Their Fulfillment (*Erfüllung*) in Christianity," where he concluded that "[t]hese books were not composed by Jews; they are inspired by the Holy Ghost, and therefore they are the word of God, they are God's books". Porter concludes: "So does the latter-day Tertullian refute the latter-day Marcionites" (Porter 105). His point, of course, is that both the attack and defense of the Old Testament worked within the same historical paradigm, and that it was this paradigm which suppressed the possibility of reading the Old Testament on its own terms. Both the attack and defense of the Old Testament, in other words, "had long been absorbed into the evangelical and messianic rhetoric of the Third Reich" (Porter 106).

We might draw two important conclusions from the previous interplay between Auerbach's "*Figura*" and James I. Porter's "Disfigurations". First, that the context of production and reception of Auerbach's philological essay was defined by the *longue durée* development of European nationalisms and their respective im-

perial projects, a process that reached a violent climax in the 1930s and 40s. As we have seen, Auerbach's philological interest in *figura* was ultimately related to its historical power, we might even say by its historical triumph. The explanation of this power was urgent. For just as early Christianity's *figura* —its unified history of salvation— was troubled by the "blind" Jew, European national *figuras* in the 19th and 20th centuries were troubled by the existence of Jewish history in all its complex relations to nation-states. In both cases, Jewish history represented the element which resisted the creation of a "universal", unified narrative through figural reading —a historical reality that refused to be subsumed under the timelessness of the figure. In both cases, also, *figura* was deployed as a rhetorical strategy in a missionary context. It accomplished its mission by fulfilling and annulling the historicity of its precursors, a kind of erasure, also, of its own historical origin. Or we should rather say that *figura* substitutes the historical origins of Christianity in Judaism for an eternal origin, the eternity of the figure.

The second conclusion involves developing a point implicit in both Auerbach's and Porter's texts, but that I wish to emphasize further: mainly, that *figura* was a technique for the production of subjects, both national and religious. Its two dimensions, as a practice of reading and a vision of history, are subsumed into this fundamental operation. What characterizes these figural subjects —what subjects them in the first place— is the role of protagonist that they acquire through a belief in the "universal history of salvation". As we have seen, this universal history could only be articulated through an original repression. Nonetheless, this repression revealed itself in the form of the "blind" Jew, a blindness that expressed resistance to the subsumption of the Jewish Bible into the New Testament. We might now notice the pairing of such strange elements in Auerbach's formulation, where the antonym of "universality" is "blindness". But we might also speculate that "blindness" is a metaphor insofar as it substitutes the true antonym of the "universal": not the

"particular", which can always be thought of as an instance of the universal, but rather the "incommensurable".

Thus, if the figural subject is characterized by its place in a single universal history, its 'other' appears not simply as that which is different, but as that which is irreducibly different: as radical difference per se. At the same time, the irreducible particularity of the 'other' remains the main threat to the subject's existence, since it represents a point of view that challenges, by its mere existence, its claim to universality. Like the narrative out of which it emerges, the figural subject is constituted around a blind spot, which it must continually repress. Perhaps we could say that it is constituted through the very act of looking away, for to look directly at its repressed object would be to undo itself.

"Los ojos de los indios"

Erich Auerbach's philological investigation into the history of figural reading and Elena Garro's short story, "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" (from her impressive 1963 collection, *La semana de colores*), share a concern with vertical notions of history that break the "horizontal process" of modern historical narratives. As we have seen, Auerbach considers that "in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other that is promised and not yet seen" (59). In the case of "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas", Garro's short story vertically interweaves two historical moments through its protagonist, Laura, who is simultaneously the wife of a 1960s government bureaucrat and the wife of an Aztec warrior during the fall of Tenochtitlan. Her life as a modern bourgeois wife in Mexico City is disrupted three times in the story by the appearance of her Aztec husband, who takes her back in time to witness the destruction of the Aztec

Empire. These three moments structure the tale, producing a permanent tension between present and past.

Unlike the early Christians, however, Laura is incapable of establishing a *figura* out of the two moments —she is incapable of envisioning Mexican history, and her place in it, in terms of a single history. Garro's short story thus describes the undoing of *figura* experienced by Laura, which is the undoing of Laura herself as a national subject. By making this argument, I wish to both develop and challenge Margo Glantz's superb reading of Garro's short story. Glantz writes that:

> Laura ha abandonado a los suyos como los tlaxcaltecas abandonaron a su raza para aliarse con los españoles: peor aún, Laura ha obrado como la Malinche, es la Malinche, se ha hecho cuerpo con ella, pero una Malinche "que ha comprendido la magnitud de su traición", el tamaño de su culpa, por eso "tuve miedo y quise huir", agrega. Y ese tamaño lo cuantifica el hecho de que, siglos más tarde, sea una mujer de la clase dominante la que se conciba a sí misma como traidora, como Malinche: una Malinche rubia que como la indígena traiciona a los suyos pero reforzando el revés de la misma trama porque al traicionar no aumenta las filas de los conquistadores sino las de los conquistados, las de los vencidos: ha asumido su visión. (Glantz 173)

Although it doesn't seem to me that the figure of the Malinche plays an especially important role in Garro's short story (its title refers rather directly to the Tlaxcaltecas' guilt), Glantz is right when she points out the contradiction at the heart of the tale: a woman from the upper classes "thinks of herself" ("conciba a sí misma") as a traitor and thus "assumes the vision" of the vanquished. Indeed, Laura's "vision" or "sight" plays a crucial role in Garro's narration. And yet, as I will show, the identification with the vision of the vanquished always remains incomplete. This is the consequence, I shall argue, of both Laura's willingness and hesitancy to look at the repressed object on which a unified Mexican history is built: the Fall of Tenochtit-

lan. Rather than looking directly at this repressed object, Laura's sight always meets her Aztec husband's "gaze", which looks back at Laura and thus mediates the relation between her sight and the blind spot of Mexican history[2]. Indeed, the desire for a unified history does not disappear completely from the text, but rather is displaced to the promise of eternity offered by Laura's Aztec husband. In "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" Mexican history becomes, in Auerbach's words, "something other that is promised and not yet seen".

Before paying attention to the interplay between Laura's sight and her Aztec husband's gaze, however, we must unpack the complex rhetorical operation performed by the utterance which gives Garro's short story its title: *It's all the Tlaxcaltecas' fault*. Indeed, this utterance frames the tale, as it appears both at its beginning and its end. In the opening of the story, we read that Nacha, the domestic cook, hears a knock at the kitchen door and opens it to find the mistress of the house, Laura, who has been missing for several weeks. Rather than showing surprise, Nacha is concerned about Laura's safety and confesses that they thought her dead already. Laura is perplexed at the confession, as if she had only been away from her husband and her household for a brief period. She then offers a cryptic remark: "¿Sabes, Nacha? La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" (Garro 27). At the end of the story, after their long dialogue and as a gesture of camaraderie, Nacha picks up on her mistress's initial remark and says that coyotes are "más canijos que los tlaxcaltecas" (Garro 40). This framing function suggests that what is ultimately at stake in Laura's tale is the whole historical narrative and symbolic order implied in the short story's title. In other words, the saying

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[2] "In the scopic relation, the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze […] The gaze is that underside of consciousness." Lacan, "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze", in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 83.

indicates the initial subject position from which Laura falls, the figural narrative that breaks and breaks her.

The first thing to be noticed about the utterance "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" is that it belongs to the official Mexican nationalist discourses of the 1950s and 60s as a form of historical common sense. In other words, it does not express an overt ideological claim but rather presupposes a certain position from which one speaks. What this presupposition achieves is a surreptitious substitution of historical subjects, in as much as one takes the enunciating position of the other. Thus, the common saying poses a problem of optics, that is, of the relative position of different subjects in a single field of vision[3]. The mere fact that official ideology was expressed as common sense indicates its considerable power in the 1950s and 60s. The utterance "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas", of course, presupposes a genealogy that begins with the Aztec Empire and ends with the modern Mexican State and its national subjects. The "guilt" of the Tlaxcaltecas is thus analogous to the "blindness" of the Jews in Auerbach's account —it is only guilt when looked at from a certain perspective. In Garro's short story, the Mexican State is represented by Pablo, Laura's husband, a government bureaucrat who speaks "[no] con palabras sino con letras" and continually praises President Adolfo López Mateos (Garro 31). Furthermore, Pablo's last name —Aldama— suggests a link between the bureaucracy of the Mexican State and the criollos from the 18th and 19th century (such as Independence hero Juan Aldama), revealing the mediating function this particular social class had in the construction

[3] For a different analysis of the saying "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" as a form of common sense, see Sole Zapatero: "lugar común por excelencia durante mucho tiempo en México, que, leído desde la *posición* y *perspectiva* de Laura, implica, como lo fue para los intelectuales de la época y debiera serlo para todos, que la culpa es del *otro* (*Otro*)." "'La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas', de Elena Garro: problemas de su 'solución artística y poética'", 374. Italics in the original.

of the national genealogy. More concretely, then, "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" identifies the winners of the present with the losers from the past. One might speculate that this peculiar identification on part of the official discourse betrays, amongst other things, the existence of both winners and losers in the present, and that this scission might be sutured imaginarily by identifying every modern Mexican subject with the "tragic" destiny of the Aztec Empire. Josefina, the domestic housemaid, belies this imaginary scenario by disparaging her boss, Pablo, on account of his support of López Mateos.

Indeed, in Garro's short story the single history implied in the common saying is opposed to the hierarchical relations that determine the domestic order of the home. Pablo's position as both government bureaucrat and master of his house ties the domestic order with the order of the State. The domestic order, made up of class and gender distinctions, is thus imaginarily identified with the nation itself and its social relations. The most evident power relations that structure Laura's life are threefold. First, she is in a subaltern position with regards to her husband, Pablo, and even her mother-in-law, Margarita. At the same time, Laura is in a position of power over Josefina and Nacha. This does not mean, of course, that the two domestic servants have no agency in the story (quite the contrary) but simply points to an objective social distinction in the domestic order of the tale, the obvious fact that Laura is mistress of the house[4]. Finally, all of these domestic and urban subjects are in a relation of alterity to Laura's Aztec husband, who is never named in the story and is only referred to in the present as an *indio*. In the story, the Aztec husband/*indio* is always outside of the domestic order of the nation —in empty highways or looking in through the windows. The very distinction between husband and *indio* is determined

[4] For a beautiful account of the role domestic servants play in Garro's fiction, see Rossi's *Ficciones de emanicpación.*

according to each of the spaces (domesticity/exteriors) and times (present/past) where the mysterious character appears. Thus, if the common saying "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" implies a particular historical narrative, it also implies a system of social and symbolic relations that constitutes both the domestic order and the nation, or rather the domestic order of the nation.

As an utterance belonging to historical common sense, then, "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" rhetorically performs both a horizontal homogenization of social positions, and a vertical identification between different historical agents. It is this double rhetorical operation which is put to the test at the beginning of the story, in Laura's and Nacha's initial dialogue. It is really a negotiation between different social positions, a negotiation that must be settled before Laura tells her tale. After having said that everything is the Tlaxcaltecas' fault, Laura asks Nacha if she agrees with the common saying. The question itself, of course, betrays the fact that common sense has already collapsed for Laura —its commonality needs to be proven, negotiated rather than presupposed. Nacha answers that she does, although we can read her hesitation in the suspension points which lead her affirmative answer into silence. It is a hesitation expressive of social reserve, and thus of social distinction. Then, however, Laura complicates the scenario by suddenly saying that she is a traitor, like the Tlaxcaltecas. This new identification is no less complex than the previous one: it takes for granted the order implied in the common saying, only to establish an antagonist position. According to Glantz, "[Laura] traiciona a los suyos pero reforzando el revés de la misma trama porque al traicionar no aumenta las filas de los conquistadores sino las de los conquistados, las de los vencidos" (Glantz 173). Again, Laura looks for Nacha's consent and asks the cook if she is herself a traitor. This time, after the smell of coffee has made her feel close to her "patrona", Nacha answers with decision: "Sí, yo también soy traicionera, señora Laurita" (Garro 28). If the cook's first answer had receded into silence by way of suspension, this latter intervention ends with her using

the diminutive to address her mistress, a sign of intimacy, albeit nuanced by the "señora".

Right from the beginning of the story, then, the historical narrative and symbolic order implied in the common saying "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" is put to the test, not merely by Laura and Nacha identifying with the Tlaxcaltecas, but also, more importantly, by the fact that this mutual identification must be negotiated in the first place. Nacha's reserved intimacy —"señora Laurita"— reveals the contingency of this negotiation between mistress and servant. We shall come back to Nacha's role in "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" at a later moment in this essay.

Having unpacked both the historical narrative and the social and symbolic order implied in the common saying "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas", we are now in a position to analyze the interplay between Laura's sight and her Aztec husband's gaze, that is, Laura's failure to establish the national *figura* and her collapse as a national subject. To do this, it will not be necessary to revisit Laura's tale in its entirety, since the narration of her three encounters with the Aztec husband follows a certain pattern, the repetition of which reveals its symptomatic significance. As Jacqueline C. Nanfito has argued, "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" is structured "around dichotomies that instigate many ontological questions, particularly those regarding the nature of identity" (Nanfito 127). The most evident of these, of course, regards the dichotomy between the Fall of Tenochtitlan and the presumed modernity of 1960s Mexico. To this temporal dichotomy corresponds, in terms of space, the distinction between the domestic interiors of the present and the open spaces from the past. However, what determines the relations between these two chronotopes are not events themselves, but rather Laura's "sight" (or "vision") and its relation to her memory.

We should notice, first, that Laura's encounters with her Aztec husband always happen outside of the domestic space and yet in relation to its symbolic order. The first time, on a failed trip to Guanajuato with her mother-in-law, Margarita; the sec-

ond, outside the Café Tacuba, where she goes to avoid lunch at home; the third, at the Bosque de Chapultepec, where she is allowed to walk for therapeutic reasons. What is important to appreciate here is that these exterior spaces are not simply the antithesis of the domestic interiors, but are rather their analogy at the level of the nation. As I noted earlier, Laura's husband, Pablo, ties the order of domesticity with the order of the modern State by being both a government bureaucrat and the master of his house. If Laura's encounters always happen outside, they also happen in places with a significant history that have been materially and symbolically claimed by the domestic/state order. This is least evident, perhaps, in Laura's first encounter with her Aztec husband while crossing Lake Cuitzeo's bridge. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the lake's shore had been occupied by Purepecha settlements; afterwards, it became a mission belonging to the Augustines. In 1882, during the modernizing efforts of the Porfiriato, a road was built alongside the lake to facilitate commerce, whereas traders previously had to go across in boats. In the 1940s, this road was substituted by a modern bridge that connects the states of Michoacan and Guanajuato. Indeed, in Laura's tale, Lake Cuitzeo's bridge was part of a journey meant to take her and Margarita from Mexico City to Guanajuato; when their car breaks down, Margarita is taken to Cuitzeo by another car "lleno de turistas" (Garro 28).

The outside spaces of the present bear the marks of the domestic/state order and it is these marks of modernity which trigger the change of temporalities, an experience Laura characterizes as "el tiempo [dando] la vuelta completa" (Garro 28). The metaphoric dimension of Lake Cuitzeo's bridge as a link between past and present is quite strong in this sense. A close analysis of Laura's transition between temporalities reveals, moreover, that relations between time and space in her tale are a function of her "sight". When Laura gets to the middle of Lake Cuitzeo's bridge, she says, "[l]a luz era muy blanca y el puente, las lajas y el automóvil empezaron a flotar en ella. Luego la luz se partió en varios pedazos

hasta convertirse en miles de puntitos y empezó a girar hasta que se quedó fija como un retrato" (Garro 28). The fragmentation of light precedes the fragmentation of time. When light/time is stabilized, what emerges is a portrait: an object one looks at but that also looks back. The relations between time and sight are further complicated by the metaphor Laura uses afterwards: "El tiempo había dado la vuelta completa, como cuando ves una tarjeta postal y luego la vuelves para ver lo que está escrito detrás" (Garro 28). Time, like light before it, has "spun around"; but in this latter metaphor the portrait is substituted by the postcard. The postcard, of course, is related to the tourists who picked Margarita up —it reinforces tourism as a sign of modernity by relating it to a particular way of seeing, of which the postcard is the emblematic product. Indeed, both the portrait and the postcard posit not only the problem of looking, but also the more disquieting experience of being looked at. Laura's postcard is particular in as much as, one might surmise, "what is written on the back" will belie the pastoral gaze objectified in the front image.

After Laura's vision is restored, she finds herself not in a different place, but in a different time: "Así llegué en el lago de Cuitzeo, hasta la otra niña que fui" (Garro 28). It is the synchronicity of space ("*en* el lago de Cuitzeo"), we might speculate, which allows for the qualitative differentiation between times ("*hasta* la otra niña que fui"). The relations established between sight, memory and childhood might give us a provisional definition of the temporality to which Laura arrives —the temporality of the unconscious. We can legitimately relate Laura's encounter with her Aztec husband, which happens where there is no "presente, pasado ni futuro" (Garro 34), to Freud's insight about the timelessness of the unconscious. We can also have recourse to Lacan, who characterized the unconscious as pure space, a topography where time-bound events were condensed into images and organized according to the logic of the symbolic. From this point of view, the return of the Aztec husband might be characterized, in psychoanalytic terms, as the return of

the repressed. What most evidently relates Laura's space without "presente, pasado ni futuro" to the temporality of the unconscious, however, is the fact that it is structured as repetition[5]. While the urban time of Laura's present is characterized by its homogeneity and flow, as it were, into the future —"En todas las ciudades hay relojes que marcan el tiempo, se debe estar gastando a pasitos" (Garro 34), Laura thinks while having a drink at Café Tacuba— her "childhood" time is always reenacting the same scene: the encounter with the husband, the Fall of Tenochtitlan, her escape and her "treason". In the time-space of childhood, then, Tenochtitlan is always falling, like a dream where the end of the scene only takes the dreamer back to its beginning.

Laura's relation to her Aztec husband is not only determined by this analogy between sight and memory, but also by her ambiguous attitude towards seeing and remembering: "Levanté los ojos y lo vi venir. En ese instante, también recordé la magnitud de mi traición, tuve miedo y quise huir" (Garro 28). Laura's first desire after recovering her memory is, as we can see, to run away. This ambivalence is the result of the encounter between her sight and her Aztec husband's gaze: "Traía los ojos brillantes. Desde lejos me llegaron sus chispas negras […] antes de que pudiera evitarlo lo tuve frente a mis ojos" (Garro 29). However, after Laura discovers that he means no harm, still loves her even, his eye's "black sparks" lose all menace and he becomes the link between Laura and her past. Indeed, it is the Aztec husband's gaze which mediates between Laura's sight/memory and the traumatic events from her "childhood":

> — Y mi casa —le pregunté.
> — Vamos a verla —me agarró con su mano caliente […] y me dejé llevar.
> (Garro 29)

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[5] See Lacan, "Tuché and Automaton", in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

On their way, Laura closes her eyes to avoid looking at "la ciudad que ardía en las orillas del agua" and, further down the road, sits on a stone and covers her face with her hands (Garro 29). Her Aztec husband tells her they have arrived, but that she does not have to look if she doesn't want to. Laura does look, not at the traumatic event, but rather into her husband's eyes: "Cuando me dijo eso lo miré a los ojos. Antes solo me atrevía a mirárselos cuando me tomaba, pero ahora, como ya te dije, he aprendido a no respetar los ojos de los hombres. También es cierto que no quería ver lo que sucedía a mi alrededor… soy muy cobarde" (Garro 30). This dynamic, in which the Aztec husband's gaze substitutes the traumatic event, is best expressed in their second meeting outside Café Tacuba: "¡Sácame de aquí! —le grité con todas mis fuerzas, porque me acordé de que estaba frente a la casa de mi papá, que la casa estaba ardiendo y que atrás de mi estaban mis padres y mis hermanitos muertos. *Todo lo veía retratado en sus ojos* […] Me dejé caer sobre él, que me recibió en sus brazos. Con su mano caliente me tapó los ojos" (Garro 35, italics are mine). Ultimately, then, the *locus* of trauma is not located in the chronotope of "childhood", but rather in the dialectic between Laura's sight and her Aztec husband's gaze. Once the Aztec husband leaves and Laura is left with her own sight only, she recurrently escapes back into the domestic order of the present.

It might be noticed that the Aztec husband's gaze invades the domestic/social order of the present after Laura and Margarita return from Cuitzeo. Pablo is the first casualty of this invasion: "¡Lo que son las cosas, Nachita, yo nunca había notado lo que me aburría con Pablo hasta esa noche!" (Garro 31). The devaluation of Pablo as husband and master of the house is premised on the qualities Laura found in her Aztec husband: while the latter mediates Laura's sight and memory through his gaze, the former has a dead eye and no memory (Garro 31). This re-version, however, implies by necessity a common ground, a fixed point from which memory and sight pivot in opposite directions. In

this sense, Pablo and the Aztec husband are best characterized as two sides of the same coin: "Yo me enamoré de Pablo en una carretera, durante un minuto en el cual me recordó a alguien conocido, a quien yo no recordaba. Después, a veces, recuperaba aquel instante en el que parecía que iba a convertirse en ese otro al cual se parecía. Pero no era verdad. Inmediatamente volvía a ser absurdo, sin memoria, y sólo repetía los gestos de todos los hombres de la ciudad de México" (Garro 33). For Auerbach, we might remember, *figura* was based on a "similitude". In Laura's tale, this "similitude" falls short of forming a *figura* in so far as it lacks memory. In this sense, we might use Laura's tale to draw some retroactive conclusions about Auerbach's *figura* and say that the transition from "similitude" or "appearance" to *figura* is, quite literally, a mnemotechny, a technique for remembering: *figura* emerges when "similitude" has been transformed into memory.

But the most disquieting way in which the Aztec husband's gaze invades the domestic order is not by substituting Pablo, but by exchanging positions with Laura. When his gaze invades the chronotope of the present, represented by the domestic/social order, Laura stops being the subject who looks and becomes the object being looked at. After Josefina announces that a man had been looking through Pablo and Laura's window during the night, Laura is less concerned with Pablo's reaction than with what her Aztec husband might have seen: "¿Sabes, Nachita, lo que yo estaba pensando esa mañana? ¿Y si me vio anoche cuando Pablo me besaba? Y tenía ganas de llorar" (Garro 33). Later on, walking in Chapultepec, she thinks: "Mi marido había contemplado por la ventana mi traición permanente y me había abandonado en esa calzada hecha de cosas que no existían" (Garro 38). While Laura could not look at the repressed events of her "childhood" time, her Aztec husband now watches her "permanent betrayal" in the bedroom every night.

This voyeuristic position has disturbing symbolic implications. For, by going from the subject who looks to the object be-

ing looked at, an analogy is established between sites of violence, that is, between Tenochtitlan and the modern marital bedroom. Indeed, after Josefina's revelation and Laura's unwillingness to provide answers, Pablo "se acercó a la señora y le dio una santa bofetada […] Josefina entró a la cocina espantada y gritando: 'Despierta a la señora Margarita, que el señor está golpeando a la señora'" (Garro 33). In this, Pablo is the absolute reverse of Laura's Aztec husband, who truly cares about protecting her. We said before that the *figura* between Pablo and the Aztec husband could not be formed because Pablo lacked memory, a failing that was also a general social condition ("todos los hombres de la ciudad de Mexico"). We can now say that the correlative of this lack of memory in Garro's short story is gendered violence. Through the analogy between Tenochtitlan and Laura's marital bedroom, "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" reveals not only the violence of the past, but also the violence that structures the domestic/social order of the 1960s Mexican bourgeoisie.

As we have seen, Laura's tale is constructed in a two-fold manner. First, through the analogy between her memory and her sight. This analogy, however, finds its limit in the repressed object of trauma, which is never seen directly, but is rather present as a reflection in the gaze of the Aztec husband. This gaze, in turn, invades the domestic order and transforms Laura from a subject, who looks, to an object being looked at. It can now be shown that the dialectic between Laura's sight and her Aztec husband's gaze is not a personal contingency but a general social condition. When Margarita and Laura's car runs out of gasoline in the middle of Cuitzeo bridge, Margarita leaves because "le dan miedo los caminos vacíos y los ojos de los indios" (Garro 28). Empty roads, of course, stand in material opposition to the bridges and highways built by the modern Mexican State, just as "los ojos de los indios" pose a threat to the symbolic order of domesticity. For Margarita, and the whole domestic/social order she represents, empty roads and *indios'* eyes are the same thing. Indeed, if that gaze is a threat to the material and symbolic order

of the modern State, it is because it demands a different history, a different narrative of the past which would also mean a different way of thinking about the present. The optical operation carried out by the common saying "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" collapses under the burden of "los ojos de los indios" —the *indios* Margarita fears, Laura's Aztec husband, who watches the marital bedroom, and, of course, Nacha, whose "ojos viejísimos" close the story after Laura has again disappeared.

By establishing this lineage, I do not mean to contribute to uncritical readings of Nacha that take her "indigeneity" for granted. Indeed, while Nacha's class position in the short story is quite clear, there is no evidence to place her in any unambiguous position on its race spectrum[6]. There is, however, evidence to posit her as a kind of legitimate heir to the Aztec husband's gaze: she is the one who watches him arrive and makes sure, with her "old" eyes, that "todo estaba en orden" after Laura leaves (Garro 40). Indeed, the short story does not end with Laura's final disappearance, but with Nacha leaving the Aldama's house in search of a new "destiny".

As I've argued, the relation between Laura's sight/memory and her Aztec husband's gaze poses a problem of optics —of the relative position of different subjects in a field of vision. The problem of optics also allows us to justify, in retrospect, our having recourse to the psychoanalytic, and precisely Lacanian, language of 'sight' and 'gaze'. Indeed, the first argument that can be made against the use of such a language is that the short story itself forecloses that possibility. Between the second and third encounters with her Aztec husband, a doctor begins to visit Laura every afternoon: "Me preguntaba por mi infancia, por mi padre y por mi madre. Pero, yo, Nachita, no sabía de cuál infancia, ni

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[6] For a nuanced understanding of race in Mexican literature, which emphasizes the dichotomy between rural countryside and urban centers as a crucial fact in the assignment of racial identities, see Lund, *The Mestizo State*.

de cuál padre, ni de cuál madre quería saber. Por eso le platicaba de la conquista de México" (Garro 37). The first thing to notice is that, even though analysis is used by Pablo and Margarita as a disciplinarian tool, the pathos of Laura's narration is not ironic, but tragic. The second thing to note is that the pathos of tragedy results from a certain confusion regarding the location of the traumatic event —"la caída de la Gran Tenochtitlán"— either in personal or historical memory. This problem is posited also by Laura's readings of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia Verdadera*. In this sense, Garro's short story is less about the return of the repressed than about the complex relations between different social subjects and shared historical memory —the simple fact that Pablo, Margarita, Laura, Nacha, Josefina and the Aztec husband/*indio* do not relate in the same way to the vision of history implied in the common saying "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas". The distinction between 'sight' and 'gaze' and the problem of optics it poses (the position of different subjects within a field) reveals the flatness of this vision, allows us to track the different subject positions within the order of the short story, and helps us to understand Laura's tale as more than an extraordinary experience —as the social problem of the mutual constitution of national subjects and collective memory.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize something that has been implied all along in the previous argument: the dialectic between Laura's sight and her Aztec husband's gaze revolves around a blind spot. This blind spot does not only refer to the Fall of Tenochtitlan, but also, most interestingly, to the moment when Laura and her husband will enter "el tiempo verdadero convertidos en uno solo" (Garro 30). It is not only, of course, that Laura and her Aztec husband will be united in "true time", but that their union is what makes time "true" —their union is the substance of this new temporality, radically different from the past and the present. If this is so, both the Fall of Tenochtitlan and the modern 1960s belong to the prehistory of Mexico, a national narrative where time and love have not become

one. Just as Laura remains 'blind' to the moment of original repression, which is transferred to her husband's gaze, the reader remains blind to the moment of erotic identification, the point where "dos rayitas paralelas […] se juntaron y se hicieron una sola" (Garro 30). It might be that these analogous blind spots posit a dialectic between what, using terminology from Garro's own literary oeuvre, we might call recollections from the past and "recollections of things to come" ("los recuerdos del porvenir"). Or, in other words, that "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" demands its critics to imagine a future from which it is possible to read and narrate the past in a different manner —the future time of *eros* that redeems the history of violence that, for now, makes up our national present and past.

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